

The Surpassing Worth of Knowing Christ

Philippians 3:1-14

Key Verse: 10

“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death”

This is the last Sunday of 2018. Today’s passage is very fitting, as we review and evaluate our successes and losses. Paul narrates his aspirations as a Christian. His life was centered on Christ: to know Christ, gain Christ, rejoice in him, be found in him, and be conformed to him. Paul was never tired or bored of thinking about Christ. His main passion was to know Christ more. This is the proper desire of every child of God. What is your main passion as a Christian? Are you excited about Christ? Are you confident that Christ is enough?

Through this passage, may we be reminded of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ! May our hearts be renewed in his love! May God help us to refocus our goals and finish the year well, looking toward our ultimate prize.

We’ll meditate on the passage in three parts: I. Rejoice in the Lord, putting no confidence in the flesh (1-6); II. Knowing Christ (7-11); III. Pressing on toward the goal (12-14).

I. Rejoice in the Lord, putting no confidence in the flesh (1-6)

“Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you” (3:1). Joy is a dominant theme of this letter to the Philippians. Paul urges them to **“rejoice in the Lord”** (3:1, 4:4). Paul was in prison because of the gospel, writing this letter (cf. Php 1:12-14). How could a man in chains rejoice? We usually have joy in our successes. Many rejoice in their bigger muscles, bigger car, and bigger house. Students rejoice in good grades; parents rejoice in their children’s growth; we rejoice in successful businesses and a growing ministry. But what would you do if you were sitting in prison?

Paul exhorts us to rejoice in the Lord. Joy is not a mere passive feeling, but something we actively choose. “To rejoice” is in the present tense, meaning continuous rejoicing. Php 4:4 makes this more clear, saying, **“Rejoice in the Lord**

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always!” Can we always rejoice? What do you do if your circumstances are not favorable? Shall we put on a fake smile? No.

Joy in the world is always conditional and circumstantial. When reviewing the past year, you may be happy or discouraged, based on your performance or circumstances. But rejoicing in the Lord transcends all circumstances. This is possible because Jesus Christ is our source of joy. Christ is all in all. Paul encourages us to choose to rejoice in the Lord! In the world, we receive what we have achieved. But God’s grace is much greater than our performance. Our God is much greater than our circumstances. Do you see that? Paul repeats this joy to emphasize its importance, for he says, **“it is a safeguard for you.”** Rejoicing in the Lord can keep us safe. Paul explains what this means in the following verses.

In verse 2, Paul repeats the verb **“Watch out!”** three times: Watch out for those dogs! Watch out for those evildoers! Watch out for those mutilators of the flesh! Here dogs are not the cute little pets that people today usually think of. Dogs were detestable animals in society and considered unclean. Orthodox Jews also called ungodly Gentiles dogs. But Paul gives this label to the enemies of the gospel and also calls them evildoers. Paul calls them mutilators of the flesh who practice circumcision for their own destruction.

Why does Paul use such strong language to describe them? Such people (Judaizers) constantly persecuted him. What was their problem? Their teaching was based on a confidence in the flesh. The “flesh” here refers to human credentials or achievements for boasting apart from Christ. So, they put their confidence in their human achievements rather than in Christ.

Paul presents confidence in Christ against confidence in the flesh. Look at verse 3. **“For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh.”** “The circumcision,” that is, the true people of God, worship him by his Spirit. Life in the Spirit boasts in Christ Jesus, or “glories in Christ Jesus” alone. “To glory” is Paul’s favorite word which means to “express an unusually high degree of confidence in someone or something being exceptionally noteworthy.” The true people of God put confidence in Christ alone, not adding something to Christ. For Christ is sufficient.

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Judaizers who boasted about the flesh were attractive to many. Paul could play that game. In verses 4b-6, Paul lists 7 qualifications for boasting, that can be broken into two categories. (1) In terms of pedigree, he was a full-blooded Jew (the covenant people by birth): **Circumcised on the 8th day** (full-blooded Jew from the time he was a baby); **of the people of Israel** (an ethnic Israelite); **of the tribe of Benjamin** (noble ancestry); **a Hebrew of Hebrews** (from Jewish ancestors, speaking Hebrew; cf. Ac 22:2). (2) In terms of achievements, he excelled among his contemporaries: **As to the law, a Pharisee** (trained in the most respected school among Jews); **as to zeal, a persecutor of the church** (extremely zealous for the traditions of Judaism); **as to righteousness under the law, faultless** (blameless in terms of outward observance of the law). In short, he was fully qualified to play the game of boasting in the flesh.

But Paul listed his credentials to renounce the attitude of confidence in the flesh. The fallen world is driven by self-confidence and pride. But the gospel is about God's grace in Jesus. We are either self-confident or humbly submit to God's grace in the cross of Jesus (cf. Gal 6:13-14). We must constantly fight a spiritual battle against our self-confidence which twists the gospel and endangers the soul. Our church is zealous for the work of the Lord. If we lose focus on Christ, we can fall into work-based-religion. Then, we will end up putting confidence in our religious credentials or hard work rather than in the Lord. But the Spirit leads us to trust in Jesus alone for righteousness rather than ourselves. Let's examine what we put our confidence in. May we not put confidence in the flesh but rejoice and boast in the Lord!

II. Knowing Christ (7-11)

Look at verses 7-8. **“But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.”** Speaking in financial terms, Paul radically reevaluates his life. Whatever belonged to the profit column of a balance sheet (all privileges and accomplishments), he put into the loss column. What used to be a loss (the crucified Christ) becomes his gain infinitely. In verse 8a, Paul considers (the present tense) everything (all privileges

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as a Jew and all his hard work as a Christian) a loss. How did such a radical reevaluation happen? Paul says, it's **“because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”**

Here, Paul calls Jesus Christ **“my Lord,”** glowing with the warmth of intimacy and devotion. Paul completely changed when he encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. He was intensely persecuting the church to destroy it. But the risen Christ visited this murderous enemy and said, **“Why do you persecute me?”** (Ac 9:4) Then, the Lord gave him, instead of condemnation, forgiveness and calling as an apostle. He came to know the matchless grace and power of the risen Christ. Nothing can compete with knowing this Christ. Knowing Christ is not mere head knowledge about him but personally and intimately knowing him as our Savior and Lord, who loved us and gave his life for us (cf. 2:5-11).

Again, in 8b Paul says, that he considers all his remarkable past resume as garbage or smelling dung fit only for wild dogs. He gave up all these not reluctantly, but willingly and cheerfully. He did this because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, the Son of God.

What does this imply for us? Shall we throw away all our careers like dirty trash and stop our hard work to be successful? Shall we live as mediocre people or even losers? The point is not that we abandon our hard work, but refocus our heart motivations on Christ. Paul's point is that nothing can compete with Jesus because he is our all-encompassing gain.

Verses 9-11 explain in three ways that knowing Christ surpasses all values of the world combined.

(1) The righteousness of Christ

Look at verse 9: **“be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.”** We have a tendency to try hard to be right with God by our own effort and faithfulness. Whenever we fail, we suffer from a sense of defeat. We cannot stand before God with our own righteousness, because the righteousness that matters to God cannot be attained by

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human effort based on the law. We don't / can't earn righteousness, but receive it as a free gift. It is through faith in Jesus Christ, who infinitely humbled himself by becoming obedient to the Father even to the point of death on the cross (2:6-8). When we put our confidence in Christ, we are united with him, and his righteousness becomes ours. **“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”** (Ro 8:1). By faith, we stand perfectly right with God. How is this righteousness real to you? At the end of the year, people may suffer from a guilty conscience or regrets. But Christ is our righteousness. Christ is enough. May we accept Christ's saving righteousness by faith!

(2) The power of Christ's resurrection and participation in his sufferings

Look at verse 10, **“I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”** Paul said, **“I want to know Christ.”** His lifelong passion was to know him. He already knew Christ and his grace as he met the risen Christ on the way to Damascus. But this was only the beginning of knowing Jesus, whose love transformed this persecutor into an apostle of Christ (Gal 2:20; 1Ti 1:15-16). There is more to come. Knowing Christ is unlike any other human relationship: Usually people are disappointed and disillusioned about their friendships or romantic partners after knowing more about them. But Christ is different. The knowledge of Christ empowers us in every way. The more we know Christ, the more we want to know him. Don't you want to know him more?

After experiencing Christ's forgiving love at the cross, I committed my life to him. While studying theology in Germany, I grew in the knowledge of Christ. God helped me often through my wife's brutally honest comments that my knowledge was in the head, but not in life. Moving many times to different countries, I faced language barriers and my character flaws. While humbly depending on the Lord, I experienced his gentleness, mercy, and resurrection power that lifted me up again and again. Now after many years, I find my heart is aching for Christ more. But I confess that sometimes, as a full-time minister, I lose my focus on Christ in the name of his mission. Christ gently teaches me that what he wants is not my work, but a deeper relationship with him through my work.

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What does it mean to know Christ in the present time? It is to “**know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings.**” The power of Christ’s resurrection is the power that defeated sin and death. All people die, but Christ is the conqueror over death. We should not limit him, since he is the eternal Son of God. Knowing Christ is not head knowledge. It’s not theory. It affects us practically. When we are united with Christ by faith, we can experience the power of his resurrection in our everyday lives. When we meet the risen Jesus, we overcome fear, doubts and anxiety. We all want to experience the power of Christ’s resurrection, don’t we?

However, the second half of verse 10 talks about “**participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.**” Is this second half necessary? As much as we may want to, we can’t separate these things from each other. We experience the power of Christ’s resurrection by dying to our sins. The subtlest enemy of faith is the recurring temptation to boast about our achievements and works; temptation to value ourselves above others based on our achievements or knowledge. But Paul confessed, “**I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me**” (Gal 2:20). When my proud self is crucified with Christ, humble Jesus lives as supreme Lord. When we die to our pride and selfish ego, “**united with Christ in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his**” (Ro 6:5).

Who wants to suffer? Nobody, but Paul was moved by Christ’s love so much that he wanted to participate in his sufferings. Paul considered it grace to participate in Christ’s sufferings (Php 1:29). Suffering is for every Christian. Suffering is a necessary ingredient as we follow Jesus, serving the gospel ministry, looking to the interests of others. The beauty of following Christ is that, when we suffer for Christ’s sake, we enter into a deeper relationship with him, experiencing his nearness, his sweet love and the power of his resurrection. As we do so, we are being transformed into the image of Christ. Then, even prison or the grave cannot stop or defeat us, for Christ always reigns victorious.

The movie entitled “Tortured for Christ” is based on a true story of the Lutheran pastor Richard Wurmbrand (founder of Voice of Martyrs) who endured 14 years of Communist imprisonment and torture in his homeland in Romania. When he was

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kept in a dungeon in solitary confinement for three years, complete darkness, silence and torture almost made him go insane. But when he called on the Lord, he saw a beautiful light, heard heavenly music, and met Jesus, king of kings, who wiped his tears from his eyes. Heavenly joy flooded into his heart and the dark cell became the most beautiful place, a place of sweet communion with the Lord. So, he could show Christ's love to his torturers until they converted. As we go through sufferings for Christ's sake, we experience his resurrection power and grow deeper in relationship with him.

(3) The resurrection from the dead

Verse 11 says, “**and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.**” Knowing Christ involves a sure hope of the future: the resurrection from the dead. We are longing to be completely conformed to our Savior. Paul might suffer as a martyr. But he was not afraid of dying because he was sure about the resurrection from the dead. Are you afraid of death? Then, pray to the Lord, “Let me know you a bit more. Let me place my confidence in you and your resurrection.” Our Lord lives! Therefore rejoice! We die to be resurrected.

III. Pressing on toward the goal (12-14)

In verses 12-14, Paul uses the metaphor of a race to describe the life of faith. He has already come a significant distance, but not yet arrived at his goal. He passionately pursued Christ and lived a Christ-centered life; but he humbly evaluated, “I’m not there yet, but on the way.” Now he presses on toward the final goal. We see the progress of salvation: past, present and future. Now we live within the tension of salvation already begun, but not yet arrived. On earth, the church is God’s pilgrim people.

What is Paul's resolute life motto? “**One thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.**” Like a runner he ran the race, setting his eyes on the goal and forgetting what is behind. (Whenever I participate in the Warren Park run, I cannot beat younger folks; but I never quit, with a goal to finish the race even if I cannot win the first place.) We are easily tempted to live in the past, boasting in success or despairing in failure. Paul overcame the temptation by continuously forgetting what is behind. On the other hand, he kept straining

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toward what is ahead. It indicates intense effort and firm purpose in our life of faith (cf. Ac 20:24). Is this your attitude toward life as you look ahead at the new year?

Verse 14: **“I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”** Paul was constantly aiming toward the goal to win the prize. What is the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus? It is to be completely conformed to the image of Christ that includes our resurrection body. He will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (3:21). While living on earth, we go through many troubles, sufferings, and battles against sin and injustice. But we keep pressing on toward the goal to win the prize. It will be worth it all when we see Jesus face to face. Then we’ll be fully redeemed, in perfect fellowship with Christ. He will wipe every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain (Rev 21:4). Then we will know him as he knows each of us.

Now we are about to say goodbye to the past year, and hello to the new year. Let’s pray that God may give us a laser focus and power. What is your life goal and passion? Successful career? Happy family? Prosperous ministry? Do you see the surpassing worth of knowing Christ? Our Christian life is not simply about moral living or hard work. It is ultimately about knowing Christ. What does it mean for you to know him? As Paul said, it is to know the matchless love of Christ; to experience the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings; to be fully conformed to the image of Christ; to rejoice in the Lord! The goal of the resurrection, the prize for which we press on now is to know Christ himself. Christ is enough! May God give us power to press on toward the goal!